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FORM AS POLITICS, OR THE TYRANNY OF NARRATIVITY:  
RE-READING NGUGI WA THIONG'O'S *PETALS OF BLOOD*

by Rustum Kozain

[The] unity of the myth is never more than the tendential and projective and cannot reflect a state or a particular moment of the myth. It is a phenomenon of the imagination, resulting from the attempt at interpretation; and its function is to endow the myth with synthetic form and to prevent its disintegration into a confusion of opposites.

Claude Levi-Strauss, *The Raw and the Cooked*, quoted in J. Derrida.<sup>1</sup>

It became more and more the habit, particularly of the inferior sorts of *literati*, to make up for the want of cleverness in their productions by political allusions which were sure to attract attention. Poetry, novels, reviews, the drama, every literary production teemed with what was called "tendency."

Friedrich Engels, quoted in R. Williams<sup>2</sup>

### Introduction

With this paper I would like to offer a re-reading of one of the major texts in the "African literature" field. I use Ngugi's *Petals of Blood* as an example text to show how a close attention to formal characteristics in literature can prove to be illuminating and can offer insights otherwise obscured by readings which only concentrate on content. At the same time, the reading of form is not done in isolation nor as an attempt to measure it against Eurocentric formal aesthetics. Instead, form is read in juxtaposition and in relation to content and, in the process, form is measured against its own concerns as predicated by the text's content. I am thus concerned with setting up a dialogue between the perceived meaning of the content in *Petals of Blood*, on the one hand, and the meanings engendered by the form of that particular novel, on the other, and to set this dialogue to resonance in order to gain an alternative view of *Petals of Blood*, a novel which has generally been accepted as a socialist novel.

## The State of Criticism

That art is inextricably and complexly linked to ideology is certain.<sup>3</sup> By now it would be an anachronism to believe that no link exists between a work of literature, for example, and an author's subject-position in terms of class, gender and race (as examples) in history. This is so accepted that Kofi Anyidoho can with justification state, "It so happens that, often, our distaste for a particular ideology interferes with our critical reaction to even works of art rooted in that ideology."<sup>4</sup> Anyidoho is here referring to critics who "commit the critical error of judging form and technique in these [four 'African'] novels according to expectations outside the concerns of these novels."<sup>5</sup> This statement is initially fine, but on a closer analysis it has problematic implications.

First, Anyidoho's statement could imply that criticisms levelled against these "African novels" directly point towards a disagreement with a novel's "particular ideology." This is obviously problematic because it precludes criticism even from someone sympathetic to the novel's "particular ideology." Second, one can also use Anyidoho's formulation, in a slightly modified way, and turn it against him: one's liking of a particular ideology might also influence one's critical reaction to a novel "rooted in that ideology." Thus, a liking of a "particular ideology" might lead to an uncritical appraisal simply because a critic agrees with a novel's ideology. Fortunately, Anyidoho does qualify his statement through his implicit appeal for a criticism of form and technique based on the concerns of the particular novel. (I take this to mean the concerns as gleaned from the content of a novel.) Especially important for the aims of this paper is his insistence on the novelists' ability to translate "an ideology of social vision into appropriate technique and form in the novel"<sup>6</sup> (including, among others, Ngugi's *Petals of Blood*). However, it seems here as if Anyidoho has fallen foul of his own formulation—that is, it seems as if his acceptance of the explicit ideology in Ngugi's *Petals of Blood* has predicated an uncritical appraisal of the novel, because it is my belief, as I hope to show, that Ngugi's social vision is not successfully translated into the form of the novel and that its form in fact mars the explicit ideological vision of the novel.

Anyidoho is not alone in this. A host of other critics have looked at *Petals of Blood* only in terms of the political message to be extracted from it, or, as Stewart Crehan says, they have "abstracted or dug [the 'political message'] out, like coal from the surrounding rock."<sup>7</sup> On the other hand, the few critics who do mention form, do so in a superficial way. Homi Bhabha, for instance, states that "Ngugi's failure to find an appropriate and original form limits the power of this

deep-thinking novel," but he does not show why this is so.<sup>8</sup> John Chileshe also deals with the narrative technique in a short and cursory manner, and he makes the mistake of separating form from content: "[Ngugi's] message is to be as revolutionary as his literary form."<sup>9</sup>

It is this separation between form and content that Crehan decries, and it is easy to see why. Form should not be seen as a value-free vehicle or receptacle which is simply used to contain a given message. Form itself carries meaning, not on its own, but meaning produced, simultaneously, between form and content. As Crehan states, "if a novel has a 'political message,' that message is the *entire text*."<sup>10</sup> Furthermore, a close analysis of formal characteristics will

enable us to recognise the significant ways in which certain things—ideas, values, events—are not contained in the text. The conventions of literary and artistic production may disallow certain statements. Exposing these limitations in the texts. . . is an important part of revealing the ideology which lies behind the text and speaks through it.<sup>11</sup>

It is precisely this lack of attention to formal aspects of *Petals of Blood* which leads some critics to make inaccurate formulations. Ayo Mamudu, for example, referring to a particular event in the novel, states that "Nyakinyua is careful to emphasize the representative aspects and timeless qualities of the [journey]."<sup>12</sup> He quotes from the novel:

. . . it was no longer the drought of a year ago that she was singing about. It was all the droughts of the centuries and the journeys travelled by people even in the mythic lands of two-mouthed Marimus and struggling humans. . . ."<sup>13</sup>

However, nowhere in the novel are we told or shown that Nyakinyua was "careful to emphasize" anything. These are obviously not Nyakinyua's words; hence we cannot deduce that it is her that is careful. These are the words of the narrator, telling us *about* Nyakinyua singing, and the narrator does not indicate whether she was "careful to emphasize" anything.

Eustace Palmer makes a similar mistake. He looks at Munira's wish to "save" Karega through the eyes of the "omniscient narrator"<sup>14</sup> and finds this notion forced and unconvincing because "Karega hardly seems to be in need of. . . salvation. . . and he seems perfectly capable of taking care of himself."<sup>15</sup> We *know* that Karega does not need "salvation," but if one considers that all references to Karega's "salvation" are made by Munira (on pp. 243, 299, and 332 it is Munira

who explicitly states that he wants to save Karega), one knows that it is from Munira's point of view that Karega needs saving. Munira wanting to save Karega has thus little to do with Karega's moral condition or his ability to take care of himself, but, instead, it points to Munira himself. Thus Palmer says, "Munira's decision can only be accepted as a sign of mental derangement; but the process of derangement is not demonstrated."<sup>16</sup> The first part of his statement is connected to his disregard for the narrative structure. If one is aware that it is Munira, and only himself, who sees a need to save Karega, then Munira's derangement should be considered not as something to be accepted as a last resort ("it can only be accepted"), but as something which is part of his character; i. e., he is deranged (in a manner of speaking).

Palmer's objection that the "process of derangement is not demonstrated" points in the right direction, however. One of Crehan's main objections to the novels is that there is a contradiction between what the reader is told and what the reader is shown; the novel's explicit siding with the workers and peasants is "not imaginatively realised."<sup>17</sup> Thus the "omniscient narrator" states (focalized through Karega),

The true lesson of history was this: that the so-called victims, the poor, the downtrodden, the masses, had always struggled with spears and arrows, with their hands and songs of courage and hope, to end their oppression and exploitation. . . .<sup>18</sup>

But as Crehan shows, the peasantry of Ilmorog is a "repository of virtue who are merely useful as a stagy chorus," and that it takes four outsiders to rouse them.<sup>19</sup> This contradictory stance towards the villagers Crehan ascribes to Ngugi's narrative technique. The use of summary and report, for instance, distances the reader from the villagers, and the use of iterative verbs creates a sense of repetition, a cyclical pattern of futility.<sup>20</sup> This sense of futility is enhanced by the interiorization of action: ". . . movement of the mind thus replaces 'dramatic' progression, creating the effect of mental wandering stasis."<sup>21</sup>

Crehan's criticisms are well-substantiated and accurate, but although he realizes that Ngugi's narrative form militates against the novel's explicit ideology, he does not take it to its conclusion. While looking at the specificity of Ngugi's narrative (and the politics of the signifier), Crehan fails to look at it from a broader perspective. His criticisms remain confined to *Petals of Blood*, and he fails to question the novel, in general, as a form of revolutionary poetics.

The rest of this paper will focus on Ngugi's narrative form and try to identify some of the salient characteristics of that form. Particular attention will be paid to Munira as one of the main characters and as the

main intradiegetic narrator in the novel.<sup>22</sup> I hope to show a conflation between the identities of Munira and the extradiegetic narrator, and that, ultimately, because there is an amount of identification between the two narratives, they can be viewed in the same light. Because Munira's narrative—and not the extradiegetic—draws attention to itself *as* narrative, its features will then be analyzed and discussed in terms of Hayden White's thesis on narrativity. White's ideas, together with a close reading of form, can illuminate those limitations to which Janet Wolff refers.<sup>23</sup> It must also be made clear that this paper will not make an attempt at showing correspondences between historical data and references in the novel, nor will it try to grasp the "mind behind the text" in order to discuss Ngugi's ideology, although reference will be made to Ngugi's notions of literature in the concluding section of the paper. To my mind, enough has been written on these issues. I am more concerned with investigating Ngugi's narrative form in *Petals of Blood* as an instance of revolutionary poetics.

#### Munira and/as the Narrator

Throughout the novel the identities of Munira and the extradiegetic narrator are confused to such an extent that one could argue that they assume each other's positions. When I use the word "confuse," it is not to imply that this is confusing. The vacillation between the two positions is easily discerned by the attentive reader, especially when the extradiegetic narrator's narrative is focalized through Munira.<sup>24</sup> It is then also difficult to imagine why critics like Eustace Palmer and Ayo Mamuda make the mistake either of reading the narrative focalized through Munira as that of the extradiegetic narrator, or of reading the extradiegetic narrative as explicitly expressive of another character's when it is not (as discussed above, pp. 3-5).

With the opening of the narration, with the first "utterance" of the narrative, one is immediately confronted with an ambiguity which marks most of the novel. The level of narration is the extradiegetic—that is, the highest level of narration, normally marked by the third person narrative. Thus the first sentence reads: "They came for him that Sunday."<sup>25</sup> But on closer inspection, this sentence is marked by Munira's presence. With him as the center of gravity, the verb marks this sentence as being uttered from Munira's point of view: "They came for him." Here, one thus finds the extradiegetic narrator narrating from Munira's position in the text. This is clearer when one juxtaposes it with a sentence, only a page later, expressing a similar action, but this time involving Wanja: "A police officer *went* to the hospital where Wanja had been admitted" (my emphasis). Where the extradiegetic narrator is clearly involved as a character, the verb form used is the

same as in the sentence referring to Munira: "He *became* one of us" (my emphasis). My argument is that the extradiegetic narrator, when narrating *about* Munira, narrates as if the two of them share the same positioning. In fact, the extradiegetic narration about Munira is very much like free indirect discourse (FID), a technique associated with the "stream of consciousness" of a character.

Examples of the above abound: "The buildings. . .*came* to view" (p. 11); "*This* was unlike his more successful brothers" (p. 13); "They *brought* him eggs" (p. 17). One can discern this bias in focalization more readily when one considers situations where Munira is with other "significant" characters. When Munira and Wanja are together, for instance, the extradiegetic narrator, whom one would expect to be "omniscient," has less insight into Wanja's mind than into Munira's. Thus Munira's state of mind is expressed as definite, while the narrator can only speculate about Wanja's: ". . .he *felt* reassured. . ." versus "She *seemed* to accept his constant attention with a playful gratitude" (p. 32, my emphases). Clearly, the extradiegetic narrator seems closer to Munira than to Wanja.

Another example of the conflation of Munira and the extradiegetic narrator is found in such examples as "Ilmorog was *probably* his first big station" (p. 42, my emphasis). If this were the extradiegetic narrator acting with "omniscience" and without the focalization of Munira, would it not have read: "Ilmorog was his first big station"? It is as if the extradiegetic narrator were trapped within Munira's narrative gaze, just as Wanja is trapped in Munira's phallic gaze (p. 74). Thus, even when Munira is absent from a situation, his presence is felt, and this in terms of narration: "[Wanja] told the story of Munira and Chui as Munira had once told it" (p. 229).

But Munira's conflation with the extradiegetic narrator is not confined to focalization. When the extradiegetic narration turns to and into Munira's acts of narration (his prison notes), the boundaries between the two are also blurred, even though the narrative pronouns may differ. Through analepsis and prolepsis, references are constantly made from the point of view of the present—i. e., from Munira's prison cell—to past events. For example: "Twelve years later. . .Godfrey Munira tried to reconstruct *that* scene in a statement to the police" (p. 41); "*The* coincidence must have really impressed Munira, . . .he was to dwell at length on *this* strange encounter. . ." (p. 99); "It was *the* journey. . ., it was *the* exodus. . .that started me on *that* slow, almost ten-year, inward journey. . ." (pp. 117-18); "Yes, Ilmorog was never quite the same after *the* journey. . .*After the* journey. . .after *that* journey. . .a devil came into our midst and things were never quite the same" (p. 190); "For years, Munira was to remember *that* night of Theng'eta drinking" (p. 224); and "Later, years later, in Ilmorog police station, Munira was to try and recreate the feel of *this* period in Ilmorog

which was completely dominated by the involvement of Wanja and Karega" (p. 243) (all my emphases).

Taken from context and viewed in a strict grammatical sense, these examples do not satisfy our semantic expectations. The use of definite articles and pronouns implies that references to "the scene," "the journey," "the coincidence," etc. have been made before, or that references are made to something about to be narrated (thus analeptic and proleptic). Thus, the full meaning of these sentences is only realized within the context of the total (extradiegetic) narrative of *Petals of Blood*. Given that they are either "uttered" by Munira himself, or focalized through Munira, they draw direct connections between Munira's narrative (his prison notes) and the extradiegetic narrative. Since these two seemingly separate narratives do not only run parallel to each other, but also crisscross each other, it would be safe to assume that characteristics of the one will be applicable to the other one. Or better still, since Munira's narrative (which is intradiegetic) makes direct references to the extradiegetic narrative, the two narratives appear to be on the same level. Thus, Munira's narrative does not appear to be subordinate to the extradiegetic narrative, as one would expect an intradiegetic narrative to be. Since, as mentioned before, Munira's narrative is the only one which makes explicit reference to itself as narrative, its characteristics will be used to arrive at a general view of narrativity in *Petals of Blood*. The question that begs asking now is: what does narrativity mean?

### The Tyranny of Narrativity

Hayden White's thesis on narrativity is levelled at the historical narrative, but he argues that historical narrative differs from fictional narrative, to a large extent, only in content and that they are generally predicated on the same desires.<sup>26</sup> Theories about narrativity should thus be applicable to fictional discourse as well, and more so to *Petals of Blood* since it mixes history and fiction.

The first important point of White is that narrative of the performance type (like fictional narrative) is "an apparatus for the production of meaning" and not "only a vehicle for the transmission of information about an extrinsic referent."<sup>27</sup> Furthermore, the "content" of the discourse consists as much of its form as it does of whatever information might be extracted from a reading of it.<sup>28</sup> White thus provides a more exact formulation of Crehan's statement "the message is the entire text" (mentioned earlier), and puts paid to any notion of literary criticism which tries to extract a message from a text without paying close attention to its form.



The second point is that no sequence of events is intrinsically tragic or comic, but it is the "choice of the story type and its *imposition* upon the events which endow them with meaning."<sup>29</sup> In an earlier essay, White traces the history of historical writing to show that the form of writing was predicated on a certain world-view or, for our purposes, ideology.<sup>30</sup>

So, for instance, medieval annals are non-narrative and do not tell a story (i. e., they do not have a beginning, middle, and end because, according to White's formulation, they do not have "a central subject *about which* a story could be told."<sup>31</sup> This White traces to an apocalyptic social vision where things happen to people, and people do not do things.<sup>32</sup> This apocalyptic ideology is, needless to say, predicated on the forces and relations of production of that particular society that "necessitated a narrative mode for its representation,"<sup>33</sup> and since a certain conception of reality lies behind the annals form,<sup>34</sup> this is so for narrative as well.

White uses a formulation that echoes the Lacanian psychology to explain narrativity. Whereas during the Middle Ages the absence of "any consciousness of a *social center*" precludes narrative,<sup>35</sup> the narrative points towards a desire for such a center. Thus White asks, "...what desire is gratified by the fantasy that real events are properly represented when they can be shown to display the formal coherency of a story?"<sup>36</sup> Although White does not say it in so many words, the notion of narrative as phallic (in Lacanian terms) is implicit: narrative creates the illusion of "continuity, coherency, and meaning in place of the fantasies of emptiness, need, and frustrated desire that inhabit our nightmares about the destructive power of time."<sup>37</sup> What is important to remember here is that, through narrative, meaning is imposed, and it is done in order to create fixity and to totalize the past.

These are precisely the notions that govern Munira's narrative. He is aware that his narrative is, first, a construct: ". . . what are recollections but fiction, *products* of a heated imagination? I mean, how can one truly vouch for the truth of a past sequence of events?" (p. 191, my emphasis). Second, the narrative is predicated on a desire for order, the first appeal for order coming from a police officer, a figure of authority:

[The officer] believed that there was a law to it—a law of crime—. . . and he believed that if you looked hard enough you could see this law operating in even the smallest gestures. (p. 43)

Munira is subsequently seen looking for the law (order) of God in his recreation of the past (i. e. his narrative): "How recreate the past so that one can show the operation of God's Law" (p. 45).

A third characteristic of narrative, according to White, is its desire to moralize.<sup>38</sup> This moralizing principle is linked to the narrator's right to narrate, which in its turn is dependent on the narrator's relationship to authority.<sup>39</sup> The medieval historian Dino Compagni's *Cronica*, which, according to White, is one of the early instances of "narrative fullness," implicitly appeals to the authority of God. It is aimed at two groups of people, the God-fearing on the one hand, and the depraved on the other (who are supposedly responsible for the conflicts about which the *Cronica* speaks). Thus the moralizing: "To the former, his narrative is intended to hold out the hope of deliverance. . . ; to the latter, it is intended as an admonition and a threat of retribution."<sup>40</sup>

Munira's relationship to authority has already been mentioned. In a certain sense he stands in a special relationship to the Law. But even more than that, he appeals to a higher law (God), and sees himself as part of a tradition of narrators in special relationship with God:

. . . he heard the chain lock click and he felt a kind of spiritual satisfaction—he remembered Peter and Paul—yes, Paul who used to be Saul—in jail hearing voices from the Lord. (p. 43)

It is here that one can finally see the same principle—that is, the narrator as moralizer—operating with the extradiegetic narrator: the use of quotations from the "Great Tradition," from the Bible and from Cabral are a mechanism for gaining authority and hence credibility. While Munira's moralizing is obviously related to his God, the extradiegetic narrator's moralizing finds a center in the revolutionary rhetoric of Karega. Furthermore, the ending of the text signals a shift to, or a hope for a new moral order.<sup>41</sup>

The important points to remember are thus that narrativity is a "false" imposition of meaning, order, and fixity where there is none, and that it is predicated on a desire for such order and a privileged relationship with some symbol of authority.

## Conclusion

One can thus now better understand Crehan's criticism and see that any notion of a multi-voice narrative in *Petals of Blood* is unfounded. Crehan's notions of stasis through extended narrative and use of iterative narrative, and the notion of the peasantry as mere receptacles for the four outsiders' wisdom, find resonance in White's

theory on narrativity: i. e., the idea that narrative imposes meaning where there is none is not far removed from the idea of giving voice to the voiceless, which is a problematic idea.<sup>42</sup> Ironically, Ngugi states that the Kenyan peasantry are "the real actors in the novel."<sup>43</sup> With that is his idea of giving voice to the voiceless: "Let our pens be the voices of the people. Let our pens *give* voice to *silence*."<sup>44</sup> Not only are the inhabitants of Ilmorog not empowered into self-liberation in any real way (remember, four "outsiders" catalyze the Ilmorogians into action), but Munira, connected to dubious authority, usurps speech to a large extent.

Furthermore, if, according to White, a story's type and its imposition on "events" play an important part in the construction of meaning, the narrative structure of *Petals of Blood* undermines the "intended meaning" (for want of a better word) of the novel. The peasants are not the real actors; actions, to a large extent, are interiorized, and Munira, who is mostly implicated with the extradiegetic narrator, could be seen as a narrator possessed with the paranoia of finding order and imposing that order to be able to moralize. Thus the novel needs to have recourse to "authoritative" quotations (from the Bible to Cabral) since, not being able to "imaginatively realize" its socialist vision, it has to somehow find credibility.

Another statement by Ngugi perhaps reveals and explains what happens in *Petals of Blood*: "The writer who edged towards the people was caught in various contradictions."<sup>45</sup> Perhaps these contradictions gave rise to the contradictions inherent between the stated aim and the achieved aim in the novel. Ngugi indeed is caught in that contradiction, and it shines through unconsciously in his statements: "The point of the writer's origin is important. . . . He [!] cannot fully express the experience of the people."<sup>46</sup> *Petals of Blood* demonstrates this. If the novel's form undermines its express socialist vision, Ngugi's statement becomes convoluted and self-reflexive: both the writer's "origin" and his or her inability to "express the experience of the people" point to each other in a reciprocal way. Thus, if *Petals of Blood* does not measure up as a socialist novel, does it not say something about Ngugi? It is interesting to note that Ngugi was already well-established as an international academic at the completion of the novel.<sup>47</sup>

Finally, perhaps it is long overdue that the novel be re-evaluated as a mode for a revolutionary poetics. Ngugi himself admits that he uncritically accepted and assimilated the narrative technique of writers like Conrad and that he was not trying to experiment with form.<sup>48</sup> Given that form—as has been shown—has its concomitant ideological formations and processes, surely Ngugi should have been more careful

with his submission to what he has elsewhere termed "cultural imperialism."<sup>49</sup> An uncritical assimilation of an "alien" form, or a narrative form predicated and situated in another social order, allows for contradictions and fissures, and has the potential to subvert a text's professed project. Is it also not time that we start experimenting with form (remembering Walter Benjamin's argument that literary forms are not monolithic and that they can and do change with time)? Perhaps Ngugi was aware of the failures of *Petals of Blood*, which might have influenced his turn to writing in Gikuyu and to producing community theatre, thus escaping his own tyranny of narrativity and really being able to incorporate the dispossessed peasantry of Kenya.

And, perhaps one also needs to re-evaluate and resituate the implicit canon of "African literature" by not being duped by its express content, but by paying close attention—close and critical attention—to the techniques used by writers, to show up the gaps for what they are and what they say. Our attention should not only be focussed on reading "ideologically unsound" literature to show its ideology through an exposure of Macherereyan silences (à la Eagleton), but equal attention should be paid to reading so-called progressive literature, and its forms, to see whether it measures up to its own agenda, whether it can take care of itself on its own terms; to show that even there silences exist—contradictory silences—which need to be considered in any ideological analysis of a text.

<sup>1</sup>J. Derrida, "Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences," in *Writing and Difference*, transl. Alan Bass (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978), p. 287.

<sup>2</sup>R. Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (London: Oxford University Press, 1977), p. 200.

<sup>3</sup>My notion of "ideology" is derived from the Althusserian formulation of it as discussed by David Maughan-Brown: a system of representations (beliefs, ideas, myths, etc.) which function as a guarantor to the reproduction of a specific society, this specially in terms of the dominant ideology (i. e., the ideology of the materially dominant class). At the same time though, as Maughan-Brown points out, while the dominant ideology functions to ensure the reproduction of the existing order, the dominant ideology is never monolithic or uniform, and space exists for oppositional and revolutionary ideology. See David Maughan-Brown, *Land, Freedom and Fiction: History and Ideology in Kenya* (London: Zed Books, 1985), pp. 4-9.

<sup>4</sup>Kofi Anyidoho, "African Creative Fiction and a Poetics of Social Change" (African Studies Association, 25th Annual Meeting, Washington, 1982), p. 25.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., p. 24.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., p. 24.

<sup>7</sup>Stewart Crehan, "The Politics of the Signifier," in *WLWE*, 26: 1, p. 2. See, for instance, Anyidoho, *Ibid.* (footnote 3, above); Andrew Salkey's review of *Petals of*

*Blood in World Literature Today*, Vol. 52, 1978, pp. 681-82; Eustace Palmer, "Ngugi's *Petals of Blood*," in E. D. Jones (ed.), *African Literature Today*, 10 (London: Heinemann), pp. 153-166; G. N. Sharma, "Ngugi's Apocalypse: Marxism, Christianity and African Utopianism in *Petals of Blood*," in *WLWE*, Vol. 18, pp. 302-314; Florence Stratton, "Cyclical Patterns in *Petals of Blood*," in *Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, 15: 1, pp. 115-24. Since most of the critics summarize the plot and "message," I take the novel's socialist vision as a given and an assumption—at least for the time being.

<sup>8</sup>Homi Bhabha, "African Praxis," in *Times Literary Supplement*, No. 3935, 12 August, 1977, p. 989. This, however, could be due to Bhabha's article being a short newspaper review of *Petals of Blood* and, therefore, he could not possibly provide us with a detailed analysis.

<sup>9</sup>John Chileshe, "*Petals of Blood*: Ideology and Imaginative Expression," in *Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, 15: 1, 1980, p. 134.

<sup>10</sup>S. Crehan, "The Politics of the Signifier," in *WLWE*, 26: 1, 1986, p. 2.

<sup>11</sup>J. Wolff, "Art as Ideology," in *The Social Production of Art* (London: Macmillan, 1981), p. 65.

<sup>12</sup>Ayo Mamadu, "Tracing a Winding Stair: Ngugi's Narrative Methods in *Petals of Blood*," in *WLWE*, 28: 1, 1988, p. 21.

<sup>13</sup>Ngugi wa Thiong'o, *Petals of Blood*, p. 210. All references to the novel are to the 1986 David Philip edition, second impression.

<sup>14</sup>I use the term "omniscient narrator" with qualification since this concept is questioned, implicitly, in my analysis. This will be made clearer later.

<sup>15</sup>Palmer, *Op. Cit.*, p. 160.

<sup>16</sup>*Loc. Cit.*

<sup>17</sup>Crehan, *Op. Cit.*, p. 9.

<sup>18</sup>*Petals of Blood*, p. 303.

<sup>19</sup>Crehan, *Op. Cit.*, pp. 9, 21, endnote 20.

<sup>20</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 16. It is interesting to note here that Florence Stratton does not see the cyclical pattern in conflict with the express vision of the novel. To her the cyclical pattern is in consonance with, or she ascribes it to, Ngugi's vision of history and the "basic theme of the novel." This despite the fact that a cyclical view of history, with its concomitant sense of futility, would sit uncomfortably, I suspect, with the dialectical conception of history one would expect Ngugi to have. See Stratton, *Ibid.* (footnote 7, above), p. 120.

<sup>21</sup>Crehan, *Op. Cit.*, p. 3.

<sup>22</sup>My analysis of the narrative form of *Petals of Blood* is based on Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan's classification of narrative levels and different narrators. See Rimmon-Kenan, *Narrative Fiction: Contemporary Poetics* (London: Methuen, 1983), pp. 91-95. The levels are

Extradiegetic - highest order narrative and concerned with the narration of the first narrative (e. g., the narrative about our four main characters being arrested);

Diegetic - narrated by the extradiegetic narrator; and

Hypodiegetic - narrative embedded in diegetic narrative.

The corresponding narrators are

Extradiegetic narrator - "above" the story: if not a character in the narrative, normally referred to as the "omniscient narrator";

Intradiegetic narrator - a character in the narrative by extradiegetic narrator narrating another story (e. g., Muniral making his confession); and

Hypodiegetic narrator - a character in the intradiegetic narrative narrating another story.

Narrators can be further classified as Heterodiegetic (not a participant/character in the narrative) or Homodiegetic (a character in the narrative). The "omniscient narrator" is then usually an extra-heterodiegetic narrator. An extreme example is found in *Petals of Blood* when Wanja tells the police officer about her telling Karega a story that Nyakinyua told Wanja, a story which in turn contains a story being told to Nyakinyua by her husband. All this is embedded in the extra-diegetic narrative, that is the narrative that starts: "It was only on the tenth day that Wanja recovered. . ." (pp. 320-27). Wanja talking to the officer is an intra-homodiegetic narrator; Wanja talking to Karega is a hypo-homodiegetic narrator; Nyakinyua talking to Wanja is a hypo-hypo-homodiegetic narrator, etc.

<sup>23</sup>Wolff, *Op. Cit.*

<sup>24</sup>"Focalization" refers to the instances where the narrator's narrative is "tinted" or even "tainted." The focalization can range from physical location to ideological bias. I use "focalization" instead of "point of view" to avoid the negative connotations which that phrase has picked up in critical history, especially associated with E. M. Forster's liberal poetics.

<sup>25</sup>*Petals of Blood*, p. 2. Further page references shall be given in parentheses in the body of the article.

<sup>26</sup>Hayden White, "The Question of Narrative in Contemporary Historical Theory," in *History and Theory*, 23: 1, pp. 1-33.

<sup>27</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 19.

<sup>28</sup>*Loc. Cit.*

<sup>29</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 20. A possible criticism against White here: the sight of a policeman whipping a peacefully protesting black child in South Africa cannot be anything but tragic. That is, is an event such as this not "intrinsically" tragic? On the other hand, is it not one's subjective position within history (i. e., one's ideology) that ascribes meaning to the event? The policeman or someone sympathetic to the South African government, later relating this event to someone similarly minded, could for instance narrate it with comic effect. Thus ideology imposes its own meanings onto the event, but this is probably meant by White as narration imposing meaning. One would here have to think of narration in its broadest sense, because the event can be *thought* of as tragic (or comic) without actually telling it—narration thus in the sense of any process whereby language is involved, whether speaking or thinking. Here, one also finds an important connection between narrative language and ideology. Narrative becomes ideological since both ascribe meaning (in White's formulation).

<sup>30</sup>Hayden White, "The Value of Narrativity in the Representation of Reality," in *Critical Inquiry*, Vol.7, 1980, pp. 5-27.

<sup>31</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 13.

<sup>32</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 14.

<sup>33</sup>White, *Op. Cit.*, p. 5.

<sup>34</sup>White, *Op. Cit.*, p. 10.

<sup>35</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 15.

<sup>36</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 8.

<sup>37</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 15.

<sup>38</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 17-18.

<sup>39</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 22

<sup>40</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 24-5.

<sup>41</sup>See White, *Ibid.*, p. 26. "What else," says White, "could narrative closure consist of than the passage from one moral order to another. . . for we cannot say that surely, any sequence of real events actually comes to an end, that reality itself disappears, that events of the order of the real ceased to happen. Such events could only seem to have ceased to happen when meaning is shifted, and shifted to narrative means, from one physical or social space to another."

<sup>42</sup>"The idea of 'giving' a people a voice is problematic when juxtaposed with the politically more active idea of people gaining the power to speak for themselves (Gabrielle Ritchie, "Our Past: Knowledge and Ideology." UCT: An unpublished seminar presentation, 1989.)

<sup>43</sup>Ngugi wa Thiong'o, *Writers in Politics* (London: Heinemann, 1981), p. 94.

<sup>44</sup>Ngugi wa Thiong'o, *Barrel of a Pen: Resistance to Repression in Neocolonial Kenya* (U.S.A.: African World Press, 1983), p. 69.

<sup>45</sup>Ngugi wa Thiong'o, *Writing Against Neocolonialism* (Middlesex: Virago Books, 1986), p. 15.

<sup>46</sup>Ngugi, in P. A. Egejuru, *Towards Literary Independence: A Dialogue with Contemporary African Writers* (U.S.A.: Greenwood Press, 1980), p. 95.

<sup>47</sup>Carol Sichermann, *Ngugi wa Thiong'o: The Making of a Rebel—Source Book in Kenyan Literature and Resistance* (London: Hans Zell Publishers, 1990), pp. 9-10.

<sup>48</sup>Ngugi, in Egejuru, *Op. Cit.*, p.109.

<sup>49</sup>Ngugi, *Writers*, p.15.